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Tougher Extremism Law Sought

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United Russia has proposed to tighten the screws on the country's anti-extremism laws, already often lambasted by critics as ultra-tough.

"Calls for ethnic hatred pose a serious threat to public safety, and the upper ceiling for perpetrators should be raised," Andrei Nazarov, a senior party official and deputy chairman of the Duma's Legislation Committee, said in comments published on United Russia's web site Monday.

Nazarov did not elaborate, but at a Russian Lawyers' Association session last week, participants proposed redefining violations of anti-extremism laws as a serious crime, meaning that the maximum punishment would be 10 years in prison, Gazeta.ru reported.

Currently, violations are defined as a mid-level crime with a maximum sentence of five years.

"The current punishments are not entirely adequate. They do not make perpetrators feel guilty," Alexei Kasyanov, acting head of Bashkortostan's Investigative Committee, told

the session, held in the regional capital, Ufa.

Nazarov told the meeting that his Duma committee would soon draft the text of an amendment, Gazeta.ru said.

Article 282 of the Criminal Code prohibits "the incitement of hate, enmity and breaching human dignity" against national, racial, religious and social groups.

Civil rights activists say the article is more often used to restrict freedom of expression than to fight rampant nationalism or racism.

In 2008, a court in the Komi republic gave a one-year suspended sentence to a blogger who wrote that police officers should be "burned at the stake."

A year later, Irek Murtazin, a one-time spokesman for former Tatarstan President Mintimer Shaimiyev, was sentenced to 21 months for inciting hatred after speculating on his blog that the president had died.

The law can also been used against updates on social networks by defining them as public statements. Last fall, a 21-year-old from Samara received a one-year suspended sentence for forming a racist group on Vkontakte, the popular Russian Facebook clone.

The law can hit artists like the curators of a 2007 exhibit called "Forbidden Art," which included a painting depicting Jesus as Mickey Mouse, who were slapped with 150,000 ruble fines for inciting religious hatred.

Analysts said Tuesday that lawmakers should make the law milder instead of introducing tougher sentences. Calling United Russia's proposal "a mad idea," Vladimir Pribylovsky, head of the Panorama think tank, said the case of Murtazin illustrated that the law could be used to crush criticism by any political group.

"In his case it was inciting hatred against the social group 'regional government,'" he said.

In a sign that not everybody in the party favors the proposal, Pavel Danilin, a Kremlin-friendly blogger and leading member of Young Guard, United Russia's youth wing, said that tougher punishment was a wrong move.

"The current law is already extremely tough," he said.

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